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The Australian Rangeland Society

HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR THE 1992 NSW THREATENED SPECIES LISTS

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The current list of threatened vertebrates for NSW was first promulgated in 1992 under new legislation that required all fauna to be considered and, where warranted, assigned to schedules of threatened, including extinct, species. Further work categorised the fauna ecologically, including geographically. The combined studies produced such lists as the extinct mammals of western NSW and confirmed that the west had suffered major losses. Historical studies are slowly enabling a picture to be formed of the date of disappearance, habitats and former ranges of the various species and enabling reasonable conjecture as to the causes of the losses. The proximate cause can be considered to be the vast number of sheep drastically altering an entire ecosystem between 1870 and 1900, with rabbits, drought and foxes in the 1890s compounding the woes of a degraded landscape. The fundamental causes have yet to be thoroughly examined, and it will involve the way the wool export industry was managed, shifts in technology, such as in transport or artesian bores, and the way 19th century governments saw their responsibility for economic development and land management. The future challenge may be to see past achievements as an over-emphasis on the credit side of the economic ledger, yet the real challenge may be apply the new ecological insights and move rapidly to a sustainable future. This will include saving what little remains and restoring the landscape in a way that is historically aware of what was lost. This will need more ecological studies, including ecological history, fauna survey, vegetation mapping and may include either bolder policies or a more determined application of those that exist.